

# Harriet Tubman life story

## Harriet Tubman



Tubman in 1895

<b>Born</b>	Araminta Ross
	c. March 1822 <sup>[1]</sup>
	<a href="#">Dorchester County, Maryland</a> , U.S.
<b>Died</b>	March 10, 1913 (aged 90–91)
	<a href="#">Auburn, New York</a> , U.S.
<b>Resting place</b>	<a href="#">Fort Hill Cemetery</a> ,
	Auburn, New York, U.S.
	 <a href="#">42.9246°N 76.5750°W</a>
<b>Other names</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Minty</li><li>Moses</li></ul>
<b>Occupations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Civil War <a href="#">scout</a></li></ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="#">spy</a></li></ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>nurse</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• suffragist</li> <li>• civil rights activist</li> </ul>
<b>Known for</b>	Guiding enslaved people to freedom
<b>Spouses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">John Tubman</a></li> </ul> <p>(m. 1844; div. 1851)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Nelson Davis</a></li> </ul> <p>(m. 1869; died 1888)</p>
<b>Relatives</b>	<a href="#">Family</a>

## Birth and family

See also: [Harriet Tubman's birthplace](#) and [Harriet Tubman's family](#)



Map of key locations in Tubman's life

Tubman was born Araminta "Minty" Ross to enslaved parents, Harriet ("Rit") Green and Ben Ross. Rit was enslaved by Mary Pattison Brodess (and later her son Edward). Ben was enslaved by Anthony Thompson, who became Mary Brodess's second husband, and who ran a large [plantation](#) near the [Blackwater River](#) in the [Madison](#) area of Dorchester County, Maryland.<sup>[6]</sup>

As with many enslaved people in the United States, neither the exact year nor place of Tubman's birth is known. Tubman reported the year of her birth as 1825, while her death certificate lists 1815 and her gravestone lists 1820.<sup>[7]</sup> Historian [Kate Larson](#)'s 2004 biography of Tubman records the year as 1822, based on a midwife payment and several other historical documents, including her runaway advertisement.<sup>[1]</sup> Based on Larson's work, more recent biographies have accepted March 1822 as the most likely timing of Tubman's birth.<sup>[8][9][10]</sup>

Tubman's maternal grandmother, Modesty, arrived in the U.S. on a [slave ship from Africa](#); no information is available about her other ancestors.<sup>[11]</sup> As a child, Tubman was told that she seemed

like an [Ashanti](#) person because of her character traits, though no evidence has been found to confirm or deny this lineage.<sup>[12]</sup> Her mother, Rit (who may have had a white father),<sup>[12][13]</sup> was a cook for the Brodess family.<sup>[14]</sup> Her father, Ben, was a skilled woodsman who managed the timber work on Thompson's plantation.<sup>[12]</sup> They married around 1808 and, according to court records, had nine children together: Linah, Mariah Ritty, Soph, Robert, Minty (Harriet), Ben, Rachel, Henry, and Moses.<sup>[15]</sup>

Rit struggled to keep her family together as slavery threatened to tear it apart. Edward Brodess sold three of her daughters (Linah, Mariah Ritty, and Soph), separating them from the family forever.<sup>[16]</sup> When a trader from Georgia approached Brodess about buying Rit's youngest son, Moses, she hid him for a month, aided by other enslaved people and [freedmen](#) in the community.<sup>[17]</sup> At one point she confronted Brodess about the sale. Finally, Brodess and "the Georgia man" came toward the slave quarters to seize the child, where Rit told them, "You are after my son; but the first man that comes into my house, I will split his head open."<sup>[18]</sup> Brodess backed away and abandoned the sale. Tubman's biographers agree that stories told about this event within the family influenced her belief in the possibilities of resistance.<sup>[19][20]</sup>

## Childhood

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Part of [a series](#) on

### Slavery



[show](#)

### Contemporary

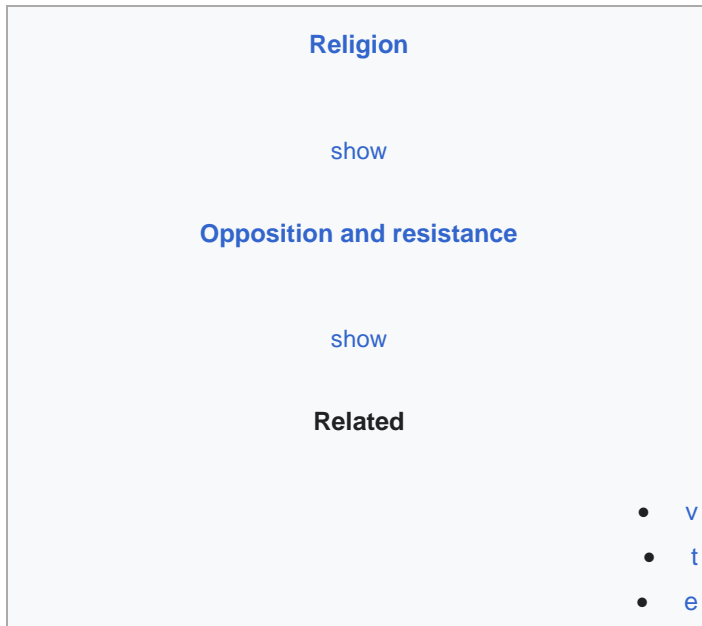
[show](#)

### Historical

[show](#)

### By country or region

[show](#)



Tubman's mother was assigned to "the big house"<sup>[21][7]</sup> and had scarce time for her own family; consequently, as a child Tubman took care of a younger brother and baby, as was typical in large families.<sup>[22]</sup> When she was five or six years old, Brodess hired her out as a nursemaid to a woman named "Miss Susan". Tubman was ordered to care for the baby and rock the cradle as it slept; when the baby woke up and cried, Tubman was whipped. She later recounted a particular day when she was lashed five times before breakfast. She carried the scars for the rest of her life.<sup>[23]</sup> She found ways to resist, such as running away for five days,<sup>[24]</sup> wearing layers of clothing as protection against beatings, and fighting back.<sup>[25]</sup>

Also in her childhood, Tubman was sent to work for a [planter](#) named James Cook.<sup>[26]</sup> She had to check his [muskrat](#) traps in nearby marshes, even after contracting [measles](#). She became so ill that Cook sent her back to Brodess, where her mother nursed her back to health. Brodess then hired her out again. She spoke later of her acute childhood [homesickness](#), comparing herself to "the boy on the Swanee River", an allusion to [Stephen Foster's](#) song "[Old Folks at Home](#)".<sup>[27]</sup> As she grew older and stronger, she was assigned to field and forest work, driving oxen, plowing, and hauling logs.<sup>[28]</sup>

As an adolescent, Tubman suffered a severe [head injury](#) when an overseer threw a two-pound (1 kg) metal weight at another slave who was attempting to flee. The weight struck Tubman instead, which she said: "broke my skull". Bleeding and unconscious, she was returned to her enslaver's house and laid on the seat of a loom, where she remained without medical care for two days.<sup>[29]</sup> After this incident, Tubman frequently experienced extremely painful headaches.<sup>[30]</sup> She also began having seizures and would seemingly fall unconscious, although she claimed to be aware of her surroundings while appearing to be asleep. Larson suggests she may have had [temporal lobe epilepsy](#), possibly as a result of [brain injury](#);<sup>[31]</sup> Clinton suggests her condition may have been [narcolepsy](#) or [cataplexy](#).<sup>[32]</sup> A definitive diagnosis is not possible due to lack of contemporary medical evidence, but this condition remained with her for the rest of her life.<sup>[33]</sup>

After her injury, Tubman began experiencing [visions](#) and vivid dreams, which she interpreted as [revelations](#) from God. These spiritual experiences had a profound effect on Tubman's personality and she acquired a passionate faith in God.<sup>[34]</sup> Although Tubman was illiterate, she was told [Bible](#) stories by her mother and likely attended a [Methodist](#) church with her family.<sup>[35][36]</sup> [Mystical](#) inspiration guided her actions.<sup>[37]</sup> She rejected the [teachings](#) of white preachers who urged enslaved people to be passive and obedient victims to those who trafficked and enslaved

them; instead she found guidance in the [Old Testament](#) tales of deliverance. This religious perspective informed her actions throughout her life.<sup>[38]</sup>

## Family and marriage

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Anthony Thompson promised to [manumit](#) Tubman's father at age 45. After Thompson died, his son followed through with that promise in 1840. Tubman's father continued working as a timber estimator and foreman for the Thompson family.<sup>[39]</sup> Later in the 1840s, Tubman paid a white attorney five dollars (equivalent to \$160 in 2022) to investigate the legal status of her mother, Rit. The lawyer discovered that Atthow Pattison, the grandfather of Mary Brodess, indicated in his will that Rit and any of her children would be manumitted at age 45, and that any children born after she reached age 45 would be freeborn. The Pattison and Brodess families ignored this stipulation when they inherited the enslaved family, but taking legal action to enforce it was an impossible task for Tubman.<sup>[40][41]</sup>

Around 1844, she married [John Tubman](#), a free black man.<sup>[42]</sup> Although little is known about him or their time together, the union was complicated because of her enslaved status. [The mother's status](#) dictated that of children, and any children born to Harriet and John would be enslaved. Such blended marriages – [free people of color](#) marrying enslaved people – were not uncommon on the [Eastern Shore of Maryland](#), where by this time, half the black population was free. Most African-American families had both free and enslaved members. Larson suggests that they might have planned to buy Tubman's freedom.<sup>[43]</sup>

Tubman changed her name from Araminta to Harriet soon after her marriage, though the exact timing is unclear. Larson suggests this happened right after the wedding,<sup>[42]</sup> and Clinton suggests that it coincided with Tubman's plans to escape from slavery.<sup>[44]</sup> She adopted her mother's name, possibly as part of a religious conversion, or to honor another relative.<sup>[42][44]</sup>

## Escape from slavery

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THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS  
REWARD.

RANAWAY from the subscriber on Monday the 17th ult., three negroes, named as follows: HARRY, aged about 19 years, has on one side of his neck a wen, just under the ear, he is of a dark chestnut color, about 5 feet 8 or 9 inches high; BEN, aged about 25 years, is very quick to speak when spoken to, he is of a chestnut color, about six feet high; MINTY, aged about 27 years, is of a chestnut color, fine looking, and about 5 feet high. One hundred dollars reward will be given for each of the above named negroes, if taken out of the State, and \$50 each if taken in the State. They must be lodged in Baltimore, Easton or Cambridge Jail, in Maryland.

ELIZA ANN BRODESS.  
Near Bucktown, Dorchester county, Md.  
Oct. 3d, 1849.

The Delaware Gazette will please copy the above three weeks, and charge this office.

Notice offering a reward of US\$100 (equivalent to \$3,520 in 2022<sup>[45]</sup>) for the capture and return of "Minty" (Harriet Tubman) and her brothers Henry and Ben

In 1849, Tubman became ill again, which diminished her value to slave traders. Edward Brodess tried to sell her, but could not find a buyer.<sup>[46]</sup> Angry at him for trying to sell her and for continuing to enslave her relatives, Tubman began to pray for God to make Brodess change his ways.<sup>[47]</sup> She said later: "I prayed all night long for my master till the first of March; and all the time he was bringing people to look at me, and trying to sell me." When it appeared as though a sale was being

concluded, Tubman changed her prayer: "First of March I began to pray, 'Oh Lord, if you ain't never going to change that man's heart, kill him, Lord, and take him out of the way'".<sup>[48]</sup> A week later, Brodess died, and Tubman expressed regret for her earlier sentiments.<sup>[49]</sup>

As in many estate settlements, Brodess's death increased the likelihood that Tubman would be sold and her family broken apart.<sup>[50]</sup> His widow, Eliza, began working to sell the family's enslaved people.<sup>[51]</sup> Tubman refused to wait for the Brodess family to decide her fate, despite her husband's efforts to dissuade her.<sup>[52]</sup> She later said that "there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other".<sup>[53]</sup>

Tubman and her brothers, Ben and Henry, escaped from slavery on September 17, 1849. Tubman had been hired out to Anthony Thompson (the son of her father's former owner), who owned a large plantation in an area called Poplar Neck in neighboring [Caroline County](#);<sup>[54]</sup> it is likely her brothers labored for Thompson as well.<sup>[55]</sup> Because they were hired out, Eliza Brodess probably did not recognize their absence as an escape attempt for some time. Two weeks later, she posted a runaway notice in the [Cambridge Democrat](#), offering a reward of up to US\$100 each (equivalent to \$3,520 in 2022<sup>[45]</sup>) for their capture and return to slavery.<sup>[55]</sup> Once they had left, Tubman's brothers had second thoughts. Ben may have regretted leaving his wife and children. The two men went back, forcing Tubman to return with them.<sup>[56][57]</sup>

Sometime in October or November, Tubman escaped again, this time without her brothers.<sup>[53][58]</sup> Before leaving she sang a farewell song to hint at her intentions, which she hoped would be understood by Mary, a trusted fellow slave: "I'll meet you in the morning", she intoned, "I'm bound for the promised land."<sup>[59]</sup> While her exact route is unknown, Tubman made use of the network known as the [Underground Railroad](#). This informal system was composed of free and enslaved black people, white abolitionists, and other activists. Most prominent among the latter in Maryland at the time were [Quakers](#) (members of the [Religious Society of Friends](#)). The [Preston](#) area near Poplar Neck contained a substantial Quaker community and was probably an important first stop during Tubman's escape.<sup>[60]</sup> From there, she probably took a common route for people fleeing slavery – northeast along the [Choptank River](#), through [Delaware](#), and then north into [Pennsylvania](#).<sup>[61]</sup> A journey of nearly 90 miles (145 km) by foot would have taken between five days and three weeks.<sup>[62]</sup>

Tubman had to travel by night, guided by the [North Star](#) and trying to avoid slave catchers eager to collect rewards for [fugitive slaves](#).<sup>[63]</sup> The "conductors" in the Underground Railroad used deceptions for protection. At an early stop, the lady of the house instructed Tubman to sweep the yard so as to seem to be working for the family. When night fell, the family hid her in a cart and took her to the next friendly house.<sup>[64]</sup> Given her familiarity with the woods and marshes of the region, Tubman likely hid in these locales during the day.<sup>[61]</sup> The particulars of her first journey are unknown; because other escapees from slavery used the routes, Tubman did not discuss them until later in life.<sup>[65]</sup> She crossed into Pennsylvania with a feeling of relief and awe, and recalled the experience years later: When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven.<sup>[66]</sup>

## Nicknamed "Moses"

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Tubman sitting (1868 or 1869)

After reaching [Philadelphia](#), Tubman thought of her family. "I was a stranger in a strange land," she said later. "[M]y father, my mother, my brothers, and sisters, and friends were [in Maryland]. But I was free, and *they* should be free."<sup>[67]</sup> While Tubman saved money from working odd jobs in Philadelphia and [Cape May, New Jersey](#),<sup>[68]</sup> the [U.S. Congress](#) passed the [Fugitive Slave Act of 1850](#), which forced law enforcement officials to assist in the capture of escaped slaves – even in [states that had outlawed slavery](#) – and heavily punished abetting escape.<sup>[69]</sup> The law increased risks for those who had escaped slavery, more of whom therefore sought refuge in [Southern Ontario](#), where slavery had been abolished.<sup>[70][a]</sup> Racial tensions were also increasing in Philadelphia as poor [Irish immigrants](#) competed with free blacks for work.<sup>[71]</sup>

In December 1850, Tubman was warned that her niece Kessiah and Kessiah's children would soon be sold in Cambridge. Tubman went to [Baltimore](#), where her brother-in-law Tom Tubman hid her until the sale. Kessiah's husband, a free black man named John Bowley, made the winning bid for his wife. While the auctioneer stepped away to have lunch, John, Kessiah and their children escaped to a nearby [safe house](#). When night fell, Bowley sailed the family on a [log canoe](#) 60 miles (97 km) to Baltimore, where they met with Tubman, who brought the family to Philadelphia.<sup>[72]</sup>

Early next year she returned to Maryland to guide away other family members. During her second trip, she recovered her youngest brother, Moses, along with two other men.<sup>[73]</sup> Word of her exploits had encouraged her family, and she became more confident with each trip to Maryland.<sup>[73][74]</sup>

In late 1851, Tubman returned to Dorchester County for the first time since her escape, this time to find her husband John. When she arrived there, she learned that John had married another woman named Caroline. Tubman sent word that he should join her, but he insisted that he was happy where he was. Suppressing her anger, she found some enslaved people who wanted to escape and led them to Philadelphia.<sup>[75][b]</sup>





Tubman

[Frederick Douglass](#) worked for slavery's abolition alongside

Because the Fugitive Slave Law had made the northern United States a more dangerous place for those escaping slavery to remain, many escapees began migrating to Southern Ontario. In December 1851, Tubman guided an unidentified group of 11 escapees, possibly including the Bowleys and several others she had helped rescue earlier, northward. There is evidence to suggest that Tubman and her group stopped at the home of abolitionist and former slave [Frederick Douglass](#).<sup>[77]</sup> Douglass and Tubman admired one another greatly as they both struggled against slavery. Years later he contrasted his efforts with hers, writing:

Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in public, and I have received much encouragement at every step of the way. You, on the other hand, have labored in a private way. I have wrought in the day – you in the night. ... The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism. Excepting [John Brown](#) – of sacred memory – I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you have.<sup>[78]</sup>

From 1851 to 1862, Tubman returned repeatedly to the Eastern Shore of Maryland, rescuing some 70 slaves in about 13 expeditions.<sup>[4]</sup> including her other brothers, Henry, Ben, and Robert, their wives and some of their children. She also provided specific instructions to 50 to 60 additional enslaved people who escaped.<sup>[4]</sup> Because of her efforts, she was nicknamed "Moses", alluding to the biblical [prophet](#) who led the [Hebrews](#) to [freedom from Egypt](#).<sup>[79]</sup> One of her last missions into Maryland was to retrieve her aging parents. Her father purchased her mother from Eliza Brodess in 1855,<sup>[80]</sup> but even when they were both free, the area was hostile. In 1857, Tubman received word that her father was at risk of arrest for harboring a group of eight people escaping slavery. She led her parents north to [St. Catharines, Canada](#), where a community of formerly enslaved people, including other relatives and friends of Tubman, had gathered.<sup>[81]</sup>

## Routes and methods

Tubman's dangerous work required ingenuity. She usually worked during winter, when long nights and cold weather minimized the chance of being seen.<sup>[79]</sup> She would start the escapes on Saturday evenings, since newspapers would not print runaway notices until Monday morning.<sup>[82]</sup> She used [subterfuges](#) to avoid detection. Tubman once disguised herself with a [bonnet](#) and carried two live [chickens](#) to give the appearance of running errands. Suddenly finding herself walking toward a former enslaver, she yanked the strings holding the birds' legs, and their agitation allowed her to

avoid eye contact.<sup>[83]</sup> Later she recognized a fellow train passenger as a former enslaver; she snatched a nearby newspaper and pretended to read. Tubman was known to be illiterate, and the man ignored her.<sup>[84]</sup>

In an 1897 interview with historian [Wilbur Siebert](#), Tubman named some people who helped her and places she stayed along the Underground Railroad. She stayed with [Sam Green](#), a free black minister living in [East New Market, Maryland](#); she also hid near her parents' home at Poplar Neck. She would travel from there northeast to [Sandtown](#) and [Willow Grove, Delaware](#), and to the [Camden](#) area where free black agents, William and Nat Brinkley and Abraham Gibbs, guided her north past [Dover](#), [Smyrna](#), and [Blackbird](#), where other agents would take her across the [Chesapeake and Delaware Canal](#) to [New Castle](#) and [Wilmington](#). In Wilmington, Quaker [Thomas Garrett](#) would secure transportation to [William Still](#)'s office or the homes of other Underground Railroad operators in the greater Philadelphia area. Still is credited with helping hundreds escape to safer places in New York, [New England](#), and Southern Ontario.<sup>[85]</sup>

Tubman's faith was another important resource as she ventured repeatedly into Maryland. The visions from her childhood head injury continued, and she saw them as divine premonitions. She spoke of "consulting with God", and trusted that He would keep her safe.<sup>[86]</sup> Garrett once said of her, "I never met with any person of any color who had more confidence in the voice of God, as spoken direct to her soul."<sup>[86]</sup> Her faith also provided immediate assistance. She used [spirituals](#) as coded messages, warning fellow travelers of danger or to signal a clear path. She sang versions of "[Go Down Moses](#)" and changed the lyrics to indicate that it was either safe or too dangerous to proceed.<sup>[87]</sup> As she led escapees across the border, she would call out, "Glory to God and Jesus, too. One more soul is safe!"<sup>[88]</sup>

She carried a [revolver](#) as protection from slave catchers and their dogs. Tubman also threatened to shoot anyone who tried to turn back since that would risk the safety of the remaining group, as well as anyone who helped them on the way.<sup>[89][90]</sup> Tubman spoke of one man who insisted he was going to go back to the plantation. She pointed the gun at his head and said, "Go on or die."<sup>[91]</sup> Several days later, the man who wavered crossed into Canada with the rest of the group.<sup>[86]</sup>

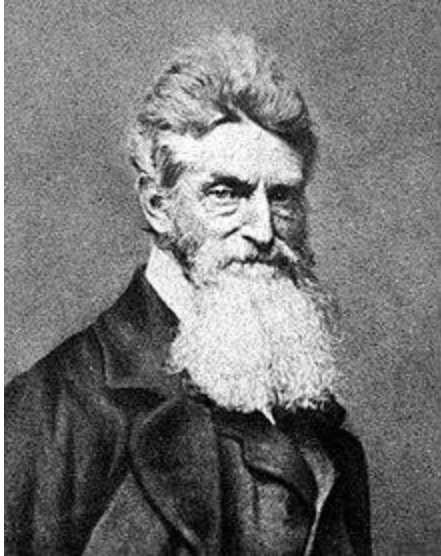
By the late 1850s, Eastern Shore slaveholders were holding public meetings about the large number of escapes in the area; they cast suspicion on free blacks and white abolitionists. They did not know that "Minty", the petite, disabled woman who had run away years before, was responsible for freeing so many enslaved people.<sup>[92]</sup> Though a popular legend persists about a reward of \$40,000 (equivalent to \$1,303,000 in 2022<sup>[45]</sup>) for Tubman's capture, this is a manufactured figure: in 1867, in support of Tubman's claim for a military pension, an abolitionist named Sallie Holley wrote that \$40,000 "was not too great a reward for Maryland slaveholders to offer for her".<sup>[93]</sup> If it were real, such a high reward would have garnered national attention. A reward of \$12,000 has also been claimed, though no documentation has been found for either figure.<sup>[94][95]</sup>

Tubman and the fugitives she assisted were never captured.<sup>[96]</sup> Years later, she told an audience: "I was conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say – I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger."<sup>[5]</sup>

## John Brown and Harpers Ferry

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Main article: [John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry](#)



Tubman helped [John Brown](#) plan and recruit for the raid at Harpers Ferry.

In April 1858, Tubman was introduced to the abolitionist [John Brown](#), an [insurgent](#) who advocated the use of violence to destroy slavery in the United States.<sup>[97]</sup> Although she was not previously involved in armed insurrection, she agreed with his course of [direct action](#) and supported his goals.<sup>[98]</sup> Like Tubman, he spoke of being called by God, and trusted the divine to protect him from the wrath of slavers. She, meanwhile, claimed to have had a prophetic vision of meeting Brown before their encounter.<sup>[99]</sup>

Thus, as he began recruiting supporters for an attack on slaveholders, Brown was joined by "General Tubman", as he called her.<sup>[100]</sup> Her knowledge of support networks and resources in the [border states](#) of Pennsylvania, Maryland and Delaware was invaluable to Brown and his planners. Although other abolitionists like Douglass did not endorse his tactics, Brown dreamed of fighting to create a new state for those freed from slavery, and made preparations for military action. He believed that after he began the first battle, the enslaved would rise up and carry out a rebellion across the slave states.<sup>[101]</sup> He asked Tubman to gather former slaves then living in Southern Ontario who might be willing to join his fighting force, which she did.<sup>[102]</sup>

On May 8, 1858, Brown held a meeting in [Chatham](#), Canada, where he unveiled his plan for a [raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia](#).<sup>[103]</sup> When word of the plan was leaked to the government, Brown put the scheme on hold and began raising funds for its eventual resumption. Tubman aided him in this effort and with more detailed plans for the assault.<sup>[104]</sup>

Tubman was busy during this time, giving talks to abolitionist audiences and tending to her relatives. In early October 1859, as Brown and his men prepared to launch the attack, Tubman was ill in [New Bedford, Massachusetts](#).<sup>[105]</sup> It is not known whether she still intended to join Brown's raid or if she had become skeptical of the plan,<sup>[106][107]</sup> but when the raid on Harpers Ferry took place on October 16, Tubman had recovered from her illness and was in New York City.<sup>[108]</sup>

The raid failed; Brown was convicted of [treason](#), murder, and inciting a rebellion, and he was hanged on December 2. His actions were seen by many abolitionists as a symbol of proud resistance, carried out by a noble martyr.<sup>[109]</sup> Tubman herself was effusive with praise. She later told a friend: "[H]e done more in dying, than 100 men would in living."<sup>[110]</sup>

## Auburn and Margaret

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In early 1859, [Frances Adeline Seward](#), the wife of abolitionist Republican U.S. Senator [William H. Seward](#), sold Tubman a seven-acre (2.8 ha) farm in [Fleming, New York](#),<sup>[111][112]</sup> for \$1,200 (equivalent

to \$42,200 in 2022<sup>[45]</sup>).<sup>[113][c]</sup> The adjacent city of [Auburn](#) was a hotbed of antislavery activism, and Tubman took the opportunity to move her parents from Canada back to the U.S.<sup>[118]</sup> Her farmstead became a haven for Tubman's family and friends. For years, she took in relatives and boarders, offering a safe place for black Americans seeking a better life in the north.<sup>[76]</sup>

Shortly after acquiring the farm, Tubman went back to Maryland and returned with an eight-year-old light-skinned black girl named Margaret, who Tubman said was her niece.<sup>[118]</sup> She also indicated the girl's parents were free blacks. According to Margaret's daughter Alice, Margaret later described her childhood home as prosperous and said that she left behind a twin brother.<sup>[118][119]</sup> These descriptions conflict with what is known about the families of Tubman's siblings, which created uncertainty among historians about the relationship and Tubman's motivations.<sup>[120]</sup> Alice called Tubman's actions a "kidnapping",<sup>[119]</sup> saying, "she had taken the child from a sheltered good home to a place where there was nobody to care for her".<sup>[121]</sup> After speculating in her 2004 biography of Tubman that Margaret might have been Tubman's own secret daughter,<sup>[122]</sup> Kate Larson found evidence that Margaret was the daughter of Isaac and Mary Woolford, a free black couple who were neighbors of Tubman's parents in Maryland and who had twins named James and Margaret.<sup>[123][124]</sup>

In November 1860, Tubman conducted her last rescue mission. Throughout the 1850s, Tubman had been unable to effect the escape of her sister Rachel, and Rachel's two children Ben and Angerine. Upon returning to Dorchester County, Tubman discovered that Rachel had died, and the children could be rescued only if she could pay a bribe of \$30 (equivalent to \$980 in 2022<sup>[45]</sup>). She did not have the money, so the children remained enslaved. Their fates remain unknown.<sup>[125]</sup> Never one to waste a trip, Tubman gathered another group, including the Ennalls family, ready and willing to take the risks of the journey north.<sup>[126]</sup> It took them weeks to get away safely because of slave catchers forcing them to hide out longer than expected. The weather was unseasonably cold and they had little food. The Ennalls' infant child was quieted with [paregoric](#) while slave patrols rode by.<sup>[127]</sup> They safely reached the home of David and [Martha Wright](#) in Auburn on December 28, 1860.<sup>[128]</sup>

## American Civil War

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A woodcut of Tubman in her [Civil War](#) clothing

When the [Civil War](#) broke out in 1861, Tubman had a vision that the war would soon lead to the abolition of slavery.<sup>[129]</sup> More immediately, enslaved people near [Union](#) positions began escaping in



large numbers. General [Benjamin Butler](#) declared these escapees to be "[contraband](#)" – property seized by northern forces – and put them to work, initially without pay, at [Fort Monroe](#) in Virginia.<sup>[130][131]</sup> The number of "contrabands" encamped at Fort Monroe and other Union positions rapidly increased.<sup>[132][133]</sup> In January 1862, Tubman volunteered to support the Union cause and began helping refugees in the camps, particularly in [Port Royal, South Carolina](#).<sup>[134]</sup>

In South Carolina, Tubman met General [David Hunter](#), a strong supporter of abolition. He declared all of the "contrabands" in the Port Royal district free, and began gathering formerly enslaved people for a regiment of black soldiers.<sup>[135]</sup> U.S. President [Abraham Lincoln](#) was not yet prepared to enforce emancipation on the southern states and reprimanded Hunter for his actions.<sup>[135]</sup> Tubman condemned Lincoln's response and his general unwillingness to consider ending slavery in the U.S., for both moral and practical reasons:

God won't let master Lincoln beat the South till he does *the right thing*. Master Lincoln, he's a great man, and I am a poor negro; but the negro can tell master Lincoln how to save the money and the young men. He can do it by setting the negro free.<sup>[136]</sup>

Tubman served as a nurse in Port Royal, preparing remedies from local plants and aiding soldiers suffering from [dysentery](#) and infectious diseases. At first, she received government rations for her work, but to dispel a perception that she was getting special treatment, she gave up her right to these supplies and made money selling pies and root beer, which she made in the evenings.<sup>[137]</sup>

## Scouting and the Combahee River Raid

When Lincoln issued the [Emancipation Proclamation](#), Tubman considered it a positive but incomplete step toward the goal of liberating all black people from slavery. She turned her own efforts towards more direct actions to defeat the [Confederacy](#).<sup>[138][139]</sup> In early 1863, Tubman used her knowledge of covert travel and subterfuge to lead a band of scouts through the land around Port Royal.<sup>[140]</sup> Her group, working under the orders of Secretary of War [Edwin Stanton](#), mapped the unfamiliar terrain and [reconnoitered](#) its inhabitants. She later worked alongside Colonel [James Montgomery](#), and provided him with key intelligence that aided in the capture of [Jacksonville, Florida](#).<sup>[141]</sup>

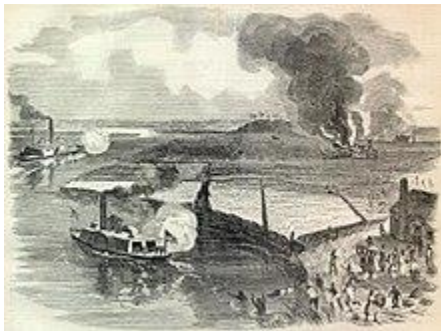


Illustration of the [Combahee River Raid](#) from [Harper's Weekly](#)

Later that year, Tubman's intelligence gathering played a key role in the [raid at Combahee Ferry](#). She guided three steamboats with black soldiers under Montgomery's command past mines on the [Combahee River](#) to assault several plantations.<sup>[142]</sup> Once ashore, the Union troops set fire to the plantations, destroying infrastructure and seizing thousands of dollars worth of food and supplies.<sup>[143]</sup> Forewarned of the raid by Tubman's spy network, enslaved people throughout the area heard steamboats' whistles and understood that they were being liberated.<sup>[144]</sup> Tubman watched as those fleeing slavery stampeded toward the boats; she later described a scene of chaos with women carrying still-steaming pots of rice, pigs squealing in bags slung over shoulders, and babies hanging around their parents' necks.<sup>[145]</sup> Armed overseers tried to stop the mass escape, but their efforts were nearly useless in the tumult.<sup>[146]</sup> As Confederate troops raced to the scene, the steamboats took off toward [Beaufort](#) with more than 750 formerly enslaved people.<sup>[147][148]</sup>

Newspapers heralded Tubman's "patriotism, sagacity, energy, [and] ability" in the raid,<sup>[149]</sup> and she was praised for her recruiting efforts – more than 100 of the newly liberated men joined the Union army.<sup>[149]</sup> Reports about her involvement in the raid led to a revival of the "General Tubman" appellation previously given to her by John Brown.<sup>[150]</sup> Although her contributions have sometimes been exaggerated,<sup>[d]</sup> her role in the raid led to her being widely credited as the first woman to lead U.S. troops in an armed assault.<sup>[151]</sup>

In July 1863, Tubman worked with Colonel [Robert Gould Shaw](#) at the assault on [Fort Wagner](#), reportedly serving him his last meal.<sup>[153]</sup> She later described the battle to historian [Albert Bushnell Hart](#):

And then we saw the lightning, and that was the guns; and then we heard the thunder, and that was the big guns; and then we heard the rain falling, and that was the drops of blood falling; and when we came to get the crops, it was dead men that we reaped.<sup>[154]</sup>

For two more years, Tubman worked for the Union forces, tending to newly liberated people, scouting into Confederate territory, and nursing wounded soldiers in Virginia, a task she continued for several months after the Confederacy surrendered in April 1865.<sup>[155]</sup>

## Later life

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Formal portrait of Tubman taken after the Civil War and circulated as a *carte de visite*<sup>[156]</sup>

Tubman had received little pay for her Union military service. She was not a regular soldier and was only occasionally compensated for her work as a spy and scout; her work as a nurse was entirely unpaid.<sup>[157][158]</sup> For over three years of service, she received a total of \$200 (equivalent to \$3,820 in 2022<sup>[45]</sup>).<sup>[159][160]</sup> Her unofficial status caused great difficulty in documenting her service, and the U.S. government was slow to recognize any debt to her.<sup>[161]</sup> Meanwhile, her humanitarian work for her family and the formerly enslaved kept her in a state of constant poverty.<sup>[162]</sup>

When a promised appointment to an official military nursing position fell through in July 1865, Tubman decided to return to her home in New York.<sup>[163]</sup> During a train ride to New York in October 1865, Tubman traveled on a half-fare ticket provided to her because of her service. A conductor told her to move from a regular passenger car into the less-desirable smoking car. When she refused, he

cursed at her and grabbed her. She resisted, and he summoned additional men for help. They muscled her into the smoking car, injuring her in the process. As these events transpired, white passengers cursed Tubman and told the conductor to kick her off the train.<sup>[164][165]</sup>

Tubman spent her remaining years in Auburn, tending to her family and other people in need. In addition to managing her farm, she took in boarders and worked various jobs to pay the bills and support her elderly parents.<sup>[76][166]</sup> One of the people Tubman took in was a farmer named [Nelson Davis](#). Born enslaved in North Carolina, he had served as a private in the [8th United States Colored Infantry Regiment](#) from September 1863 to November 1865.<sup>[167]</sup> He began working in Auburn as a [bricklayer](#), and they soon fell in love. Though he was 22 years younger than she was, on March 18, 1869, they were married at the Central Presbyterian Church.<sup>[168][169]</sup> They adopted a baby girl named Gertie in 1874.<sup>[170]</sup>



Tubman in 1887 (far left), with her husband Davis (seated, with cane), their adopted daughter Gertie (beside Tubman), Lee Cheney, John "Pop" Alexander, Walter Green, "Blind Aunty" Sarah Parker, and her great-niece Dora Stewart at Tubman's home in Auburn, New York

Tubman's friends and supporters from the days of abolition, meanwhile, raised funds to support her. One admirer, [Sarah Hopkins Bradford](#), wrote an authorized biography entitled *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*. The 132-page volume was published in 1869 and brought Tubman some \$1,200 in income (equivalent to \$26,400 in 2022<sup>[45]</sup>).<sup>[159]</sup> Even with this assistance, paying off the mortgage on her farm in May 1873 exhausted Tubman's savings.<sup>[171]</sup> That October, she fell prey to swindlers. Two black men claimed to know a former slave who had a trunk of gold coins smuggled out of South Carolina, which they would sell for cash at less than half the coins' value.<sup>[171][172][173]</sup> She knew white people in the South had buried valuables when Union forces threatened the region, and black men were frequently assigned to digging duties, so the claim seemed plausible to her.<sup>[171]</sup> She borrowed money from a wealthy friend and arranged to receive the gold late one night. Once the men had lured her into the woods, they knocked her out with [chloroform](#) and stole her purse. Tubman was found dazed and injured; the trunk was filled with rocks.<sup>[171][174][175]</sup>

The crime brought new attention from local leaders to Tubman's precarious financial state and spurred renewed efforts to get compensation for her Civil War service.<sup>[176]</sup> In 1874, Representatives [Clinton D. MacDougall](#) of New York and [Gerry W. Hazelton](#) of Wisconsin introduced a bill to pay Tubman a \$2,000 (equivalent to \$51,700 in 2022<sup>[45]</sup>) lump sum "for services rendered by her to the Union Army as scout, nurse, and spy",<sup>[177]</sup> but it was defeated in the Senate.<sup>[178]</sup> In February 1880, Tubman's wood-framed house burned down, but with the help of her supporters it was quickly replaced with a new brick home.<sup>[179]</sup>

Nelson Davis died of [tuberculosis](#) on October 14, 1888.<sup>[180]</sup> The [Dependent and Disability Pension Act](#) of 1890 made Tubman eligible for a pension as his widow. After she documented her marriage and her husband's service record to the satisfaction of the [Bureau of Pensions](#), in 1895 Tubman was granted a monthly widow's pension of \$8 (equivalent to \$280 in 2022<sup>[45]</sup>), plus a lump sum of \$500 to cover the five-year delay in approval.<sup>[181][182][183]</sup> In December 1897, New York Congressman [Serenio E.](#)



[Payne](#) introduced a bill to grant Tubman a soldier's monthly pension of \$25 (equivalent to \$880 in 2022<sup>[45]</sup>).<sup>[183][184]</sup> Although Congress received documents and letters to support Tubman's claims, some members objected to a woman being paid a full soldier's pension.<sup>[182][185][186]</sup> In February 1899, [Congress](#) approved a compromise amount of \$20 (equivalent to \$700 in 2022<sup>[45]</sup>) per month (the \$8 from her widow's pension plus \$12 for her service as a nurse), but did not acknowledge her as a scout and spy.<sup>[182][187][e]</sup>

## Suffragist activism



Tubman in 1911

In her later years, Tubman worked to promote the cause of [women's suffrage](#). A white woman once asked Tubman whether she believed women ought to have the vote, and received the reply: "I suffered enough to believe it."<sup>[189]</sup> Tubman began attending meetings of [suffragist](#) organizations, and was soon working alongside women such as [Susan B. Anthony](#) and [Emily Howland](#).<sup>[5][190]</sup>

Tubman traveled to New York, [Boston](#) and [Washington, D.C.](#), to speak in favor of women's voting rights. She described her actions during and after the Civil War, and used the sacrifices of countless women throughout modern history as evidence of women's equality to men.<sup>[191]</sup> When the [National Federation of Afro-American Women](#) was founded in 1896, Tubman was the keynote speaker at its first meeting.<sup>[192]</sup>

This wave of activism kindled a new wave of admiration for Tubman among the press in the United States. A publication called [The Woman's Era](#) launched a series of articles on "Eminent Women" with a profile of Tubman.<sup>[192]</sup> An 1897 suffragist newspaper reported a series of receptions in Boston honoring Tubman and her lifetime of service to the nation. However, her endless contributions to others had left her in poverty, and she had to sell a cow to buy a train ticket to these celebrations.<sup>[193]</sup>

## Church, illness, and death

In the 1870s, Tubman became active in the Thompson Memorial [African Methodist Episcopal \(AME\) Zion Church](#) in Auburn.<sup>[194]</sup> In 1895, she began discussions with AME Zion leaders and others to create a [Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged](#) that would care for "indigent colored people".<sup>[195]</sup> Despite her financial limitations, in 1896 Tubman bid \$1215 (equivalent to \$42,700 in 2022<sup>[45]</sup>) at auction for a 25-acre (10 ha) farm adjacent to the one she already owned, to use for the new facility.<sup>[196]</sup> She designated one of the farm's buildings as its primary residence and named it "John Brown Hall" to honor her late abolitionist ally.<sup>[197]</sup> However, raising funds for the project was difficult, and attempts to donate the property were complicated by the multiple mortgage loans used to pay for it. After

Tubman almost lost the property due her financial difficulties, AME Zion agreed to take it over in 1903.<sup>[198]</sup>

The home did not open for another five years, and Tubman was dismayed when the church ordered residents to pay a \$100 entrance fee (equivalent to \$3,260 in 2022<sup>[45]</sup>). She said: "[T]hey make a rule that nobody should come in without they have a hundred dollars. Now I wanted to make a rule that nobody should come in unless they didn't have no money at all."<sup>[199]</sup> She was frustrated by the new rule but was the guest of honor nonetheless when the home celebrated its opening on June 23, 1908.<sup>[200]</sup>

As Tubman aged, her childhood head trauma continued to trouble her. Unable to sleep because of pain and "buzzing" in her head, in the late 1890s she asked a doctor at Boston's [Massachusetts General Hospital](#) to operate. In her words, he "sawed open my skull, and raised it up, and now it feels more comfortable".<sup>[201]</sup> She reportedly received no [anesthesia](#) and instead [bit down on a bullet](#), as she had seen Civil War soldiers do when their [limbs were amputated](#).<sup>[202][203]</sup>

By 1911, Tubman's body was so frail that she was admitted into the rest home named in her honor. A New York newspaper described her as "ill and penniless", prompting supporters to offer a new round of donations.<sup>[204]</sup> Surrounded by friends and family members, she died of [pneumonia](#) on March 10, 1913.<sup>[204]</sup> Just before she died, she quoted the [Gospel of John](#) to those in the room: "I go away to prepare a place for you."<sup>[205]</sup> Tubman was buried with semi-military honors at [Fort Hill Cemetery](#) in Auburn.<sup>[206]</sup>

## Legacy

Main article: [Legacy of Harriet Tubman](#)



Tubman's great-niece, Eva Stewart

Northrup, [launching](#) the [SS Harriet Tubman](#)<sup>[207]</sup>

Widely known and well-respected while she was alive, Tubman became an American icon in the years after she died.<sup>[208]</sup> By the 1980s, Tubman was one of American history's most famous figures.<sup>[209]</sup> She inspired generations of [African Americans](#) struggling for equality and [civil rights](#); she was praised by leaders across the political spectrum.<sup>[210]</sup>

## Parks, monuments and historical sites

[National parks](#) and [national monuments](#) related to Tubman in the United States are the [Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument](#) and the [Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park](#), both in Maryland,<sup>[211]</sup> and the [Harriet Tubman National Historical Park](#) in Auburn.<sup>[212]</sup> The [Salem Chapel](#) in St. Catharines, where Tubman worshipped, is a [National Historic Site of Canada](#).<sup>[213]</sup>

The city of Auburn has several historical sites related to Tubman, including [her gravesite](#).<sup>[214][215]</sup> Other state and local historical sites about Tubman include a [state park](#)<sup>[216]</sup> and [memorial garden](#)<sup>[217]</sup> in Maryland, and a [museum](#) in New Jersey.<sup>[218]</sup>

## Artistic portrayals

Tubman is the subject of many works of art. Musicians including [Woody Guthrie](#), [Wynton Marsalis](#), and [Walter Robinson](#) have written songs celebrating her.<sup>[219]</sup> She is the subject of operas by [Thea Musgrave](#),<sup>[220]</sup> [Nkeiru Okoye](#),<sup>[221]</sup> and [Hilda Paredes](#),<sup>[222]</sup> as well as plays by [Carolyn Gage](#) and a collaboration of [May Miller](#) and [Willis Richardson](#).<sup>[223]</sup> Tubman is the focus of novels by [Elizabeth Cobbs](#),<sup>[224]</sup> [Marcy Heidish](#),<sup>[225]</sup> and [Anne Parrish](#),<sup>[226]</sup> and is a character in novels by [Terry Bisson](#),<sup>[227]</sup> [Ta-Nehisi Coates](#),<sup>[228]</sup> and [James McBride](#).<sup>[229]</sup>

Since Tubman's life was first dramatized on television in a 1963 episode of the series *The Great Adventure*,<sup>[230]</sup> she has been portrayed in TV productions such as *The Good Lord Bird*,<sup>[231]</sup> *Timeless*,<sup>[232]</sup> *Underground*,<sup>[231]</sup> and *A Woman Called Moses*.<sup>[233]</sup> [Cynthia Erivo](#) received an [Academy Award nomination](#) for portraying Tubman in the 2019 theatrical film *Harriet*.<sup>[234]</sup>

Artists including [Fern Cunningham](#),<sup>[235]</sup> [Jane DeDecker](#),<sup>[236]</sup> [Nina Cooke John](#),<sup>[237]</sup> and [Alison Saar](#)<sup>[236]</sup> have presented Tubman in sculptures. She has been drawn or painted by numerous artists, including [Romare Bearden](#), [Aaron Douglas](#), [William Johnson](#), [Jacob Lawrence](#), and [Faith Ringgold](#).<sup>[238]</sup>

## Other honors and commemorations



Official \$20 bill prototype

In 1978, Tubman became the first African-American woman honored on a U.S. postage stamp; she appeared on a second stamp in 1995.<sup>[239]</sup> Beginning in 2016, there have been plans to add a portrait of Tubman to the front of the [twenty-dollar bill](#), moving the portrait of President [Andrew Jackson](#), a slaveholder, to the back of the bill.<sup>[240]</sup> In 2024, the [United States Mint](#) issued three [commemorative coins](#) featuring Tubman; each coin depicts Tubman at a different stage of her life.<sup>[241]</sup>

Dozens of schools,<sup>[242]</sup> streets and highways,<sup>[243]</sup> church groups, social organizations, and government agencies have been named after Tubman.<sup>[244]</sup> In 1944, the [United States Maritime Commission](#) launched the *SS Harriet Tubman*, its first [Liberty ship](#) named for a black woman.<sup>[207]</sup>

## Historiography

Tubman hoped to become literate and write her own memoirs, but she never did.<sup>[245]</sup> Instead, Sarah Hopkins Bradford combined Tubman's personal recollections, journalistic accounts, and letters from Tubman's friends and supporters to create *Scenes from the Life of Harriet Tubman* in 1868.<sup>[246][f]</sup> Criticized by modern biographers for its artistic license and highly subjective point of view,<sup>[248]</sup> the book nevertheless provides insight into Tubman's own view of her experiences.<sup>[249]</sup> In 1886, Bradford released a re-written volume called *Harriet, the Moses of her People*.<sup>[250]</sup> In both volumes Harriet Tubman is hailed as a latter-day [Joan of Arc](#).<sup>[251]</sup> The revision took a more moralistic and literary tone than the prior work, including changes of many event descriptions from first to third person.<sup>[252]</sup> A final revision in 1901 added an appendix with more stories about Tubman's life.<sup>[253]</sup>

The first full biography of Tubman to be published after Bradford's was [Earl Conrad](#)'s *Harriet Tubman* (1943).<sup>[254]</sup> Conrad experienced great difficulty in finding a publisher – the search took four years – and endured disdain and contempt for his efforts to construct a more objective, detailed account of Tubman's life for adults.<sup>[207]</sup> Several highly dramatized versions of Tubman's life had been written for children, and many more came later, but Conrad wrote in an academic style.<sup>[255]</sup> Though she was a popular historical figure, another book-length biography based on original scholarship did not appear for 60 years,<sup>[256]</sup> when Jean Humez published a close reading of Tubman's life stories in

2003. Larson and Clinton both published their biographies soon after in 2004. Historian [Milton Sernett](#)'s 2007 book *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History* discusses the major biographies of Tubman up to that time.<sup>[257]</sup>